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ABSTRACT

The educational deficiencies of disadvantaged secondary students can be realistically overcome through a comprehensive program. First, the educational package must include an individualized educational plan that focuses on resolving each student's specific difficulties. Second, the package must include a mastery-based instructional program. The mastery learning model of teaching is essential in order for a teacher to reach all the students in a course. Finally, the package must include a set of student services including work experience, job planning, career counseling, personal counseling, physical evaluations, and parental counseling. (MK)

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A Comprehensive Instructional Package
for the Disadvantaged*

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A Comprehensive Instructional
Package for the Disadvantaged

by C. William Garner

In order to realistically help disadvantaged students overcome their deficiencies, a comprehensive program must be administered in order to provide the appropriate assistance needed by these students. A compensatory offering that only presents remedial instruction in the basic academic skills cannot be expected to help a student rise above his shortcomings and then enter society as an active participant. Unfortunately too often such assumptions exist, and when these remedial efforts are not successful either the professionals in the school or the students are condemned.

The disadvantaged students in our schools today must have a program planned to meet their individual needs. They must receive an educational offering that identifies and corrects their deficiencies in the academic and vocational subjects. The instructional process, however, has to be complemented by a range of services able to address their personal problems.

In considering the type of instruction and personal services needed for the disadvantaged, an understanding of the term "disadvantaged" is important. The New Jersey Bureau of Special Programs (1981) recently presented a definition of an educationally disadvantaged person to be one who:

is a potential dropout (chronic unexcused absences, frequent tardiness); is two or more years below proper grade for age; has insufficient communication or computational skills for a regular vocational program; is unable to form responsible relationships within the school or community environment; and/or exhibits other evidence of failure which might prevent success in a regular vocational program. (Identification is the function of the local educational agency.) (p. 2)

With regard to the reasons behind a student becoming "disadvantaged", a basic concept that has been used for many theories is called stimulus

deprivation. Stimulus deprivation, according to Deutsch (1963), describes an environment in which a child has few stimuli that are related to the cognitive skills required in public education. In a knowledge based society such shortcomings are a critical handicap. Bloom (1964) claimed that deprivation can account for approximately 20 points difference in IQ between children from a deprived environment versus an abundant environment. Herr and Cramer (1979) feel that disadvantagement "represents a condition which prevents persons from being educated to the maximum of their genetic potential or from viewing work as more than something to sustain their physical survival." (p. 27)

With the above in mind a comprehensive educational package, as shown in Figure 1, is proposed. First an educational plan for each student must be formulated. This plan must include a mastery based instructional program plus a set of student services. However, it must be noted that while this package is advocated for secondary students, many special programs and research projects have shown time after time that the effects of deprivation can be alleviated in the early school years. (Miller, 1978). To be most successful, the efforts to serve the disadvantaged must begin with the pre-school years.

The Education Plan

Each disadvantaged student has a unique set of problems. Only by establishing an individual plan for each student can his particular difficulties be resolved. As shown in Figure 1 this plan must include the instructional courses and student personal services. However, the educational plan itself must have a plan of action as shown in Figure 2.

In this student plan, or IEP, a teacher monitor must be assigned in order to insure the student complies with the plan. Even though the parent or guardian is informed of the IEP and asked to acknowledge it, the teacher monitor is the key. Of course, some students will violate any established

program, but, at the same time, others will follow through as a result of the control provided by a monitor.

As shown in Figure 2, the student IEP is evaluated periodically and revised, if justified. For those schools with a large number of students considered to be disadvantaged, a Group Education Plan (Garner, 1980) can be utilized whereby individualized plans can be generated via guidelines established for the school.

The Instructional Program - Mastery Based

Teaching the same material to all students in a class or shop at the same time is effective only for those students who are at the teacher's instructional level. Too often a student in an academic or a vocational class is not able to comprehend the material presented on the first day of class, and, as a result, he/she is never in step for the rest of the course. If a teacher tries to adjust his/her lessons in order to compensate for those students at the lower knowledge level, they are allowing their instruction to gravitate to the lowest common denominator and are not effectively teaching all of their students in the class.

In order for a teacher to reach all of the students in her/his course, a mastery learning method of teaching is essential. This technique simply requires a student to exhibit a certain skill or knowledge before being permitted to proceed to the next lesson or level of the course. A teacher using the mastery approach must arrange their course content in a hierarchy whereby less complex skills or content must be taught before a more complex skill or content can be presented.

Ideally each student would progress through a hierarchy of tasks at his/her own pace, but the record keeping duties for the teacher become a chore. Consequently a mastery scheme is recommended where small ability

groups are used. This small group approach begins with an assessment of the abilities of the students entering a course (see Figure 3). After the diagnostic tests are evaluated, students with similar scores are placed in a group which will begin the course at the appropriate module or level. The assignment of a student to a small group would be one of the notations in that student's educational plan.

In this small group design the teacher works with each group separately. While the teacher is with one group, the students in the other groups are involved with skill building activities, work sheets, projects, or studies. The teacher should not work with each small group as a unit on a daily basis but should concentrate on individualized instruction as the students work on their projects, work sheets and so on.

The interim tests shown in Figure 3 are given to detect student deficiencies and to identify remedial lessons to correct these weaknesses. This process is repeated until the teacher feels the students in the small group are ready to take the test to exhibit their mastery.

Many creative features can be added to a mastery program; such as peer teaching, a reward system, a co-op capstone program; but the greatest advantage is the potential for the virtual elimination of special remedial classes. While a good mastery learning curriculum would require additional instructors, the reduction of the faculty needed for remedial classes would offset this need. There have been numerous studies conducted on offerings using the mastery approach (Garner, 1981) and the evidence points to a need for more teachers to consider trying it in their classroom.

Student Services

One of the areas often discussed but rarely implemented to the extent required for the disadvantaged is student services. Without offering these

students the opportunity to resolve personal conflicts and barriers, the educational offerings cannot hope to be entirely effective.

Needless to say a list of services could be endless and the descriptions could be infinite. Consequently the following list presents the basic provisions which researchers today are advocating.

1. Work experience - many problems for disadvantaged youth revolves around financial need. Work experience programs have been found to be quite beneficial for school retention.
2. Job placement - this service gives a school and education the credibility needed to show the disadvantaged that a high school diploma, especially vocational education, is worthwhile.
3. Career counseling - an education is meaningless unless it gives the promise of some direction to one's life. Volumes of material have been produced for career counseling but it's effectiveness depends upon a planned program for delivery to each student.
4. Personal counseling - this is a service needed by all disadvantaged but rarely sought or provided. Their hardships must be addressed and their values clarified.
5. Physical evaluations - one of the emerging areas of concern is the physical imbalances and nutritional deficiencies of the disadvantaged. Recent research shows that simple physical complications often cause emotional/behavioral problems.
6. Parental counseling - often the parents of disadvantaged do not have the background to either understand the education process or their child's problems. It is not that they do not care, but often they do not have the opportunity to be informed. This

is an area that with a little effort schools have gained a lot of assistance.

Conclusion

Needless to say the comprehensive instructional package proposed will be considered unrealistic with regard to the money, time, and staff required. Unfortunately though only by providing the disadvantaged students with the attention they need can we hope to overcome their deficiencies. For too long our schools have tried to piece together stop-gap measures that have culminated in frustration. Only through a complex comprehensive approach can educators hope to overcome the complex problems created by a complicated society.

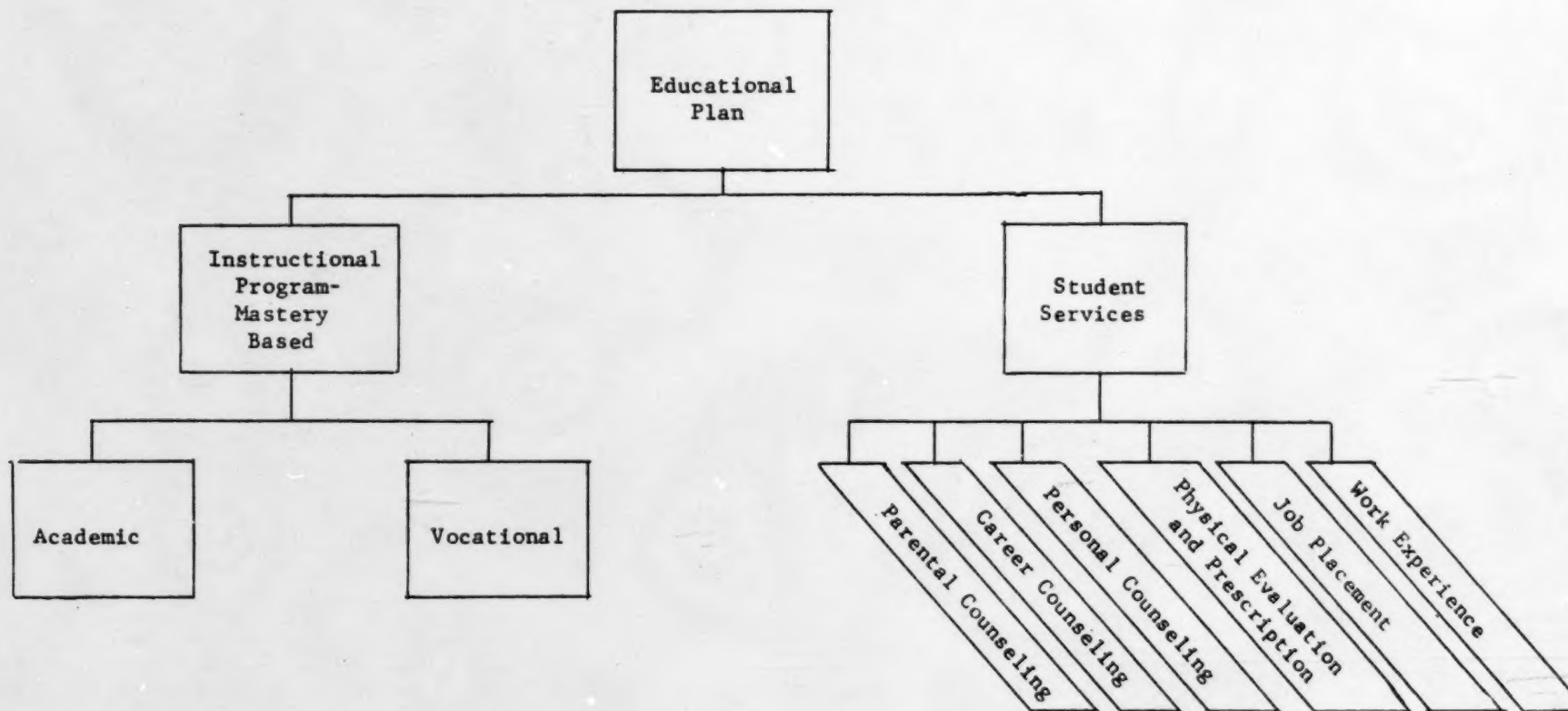


Figure 1
Comprehensive Educational Package

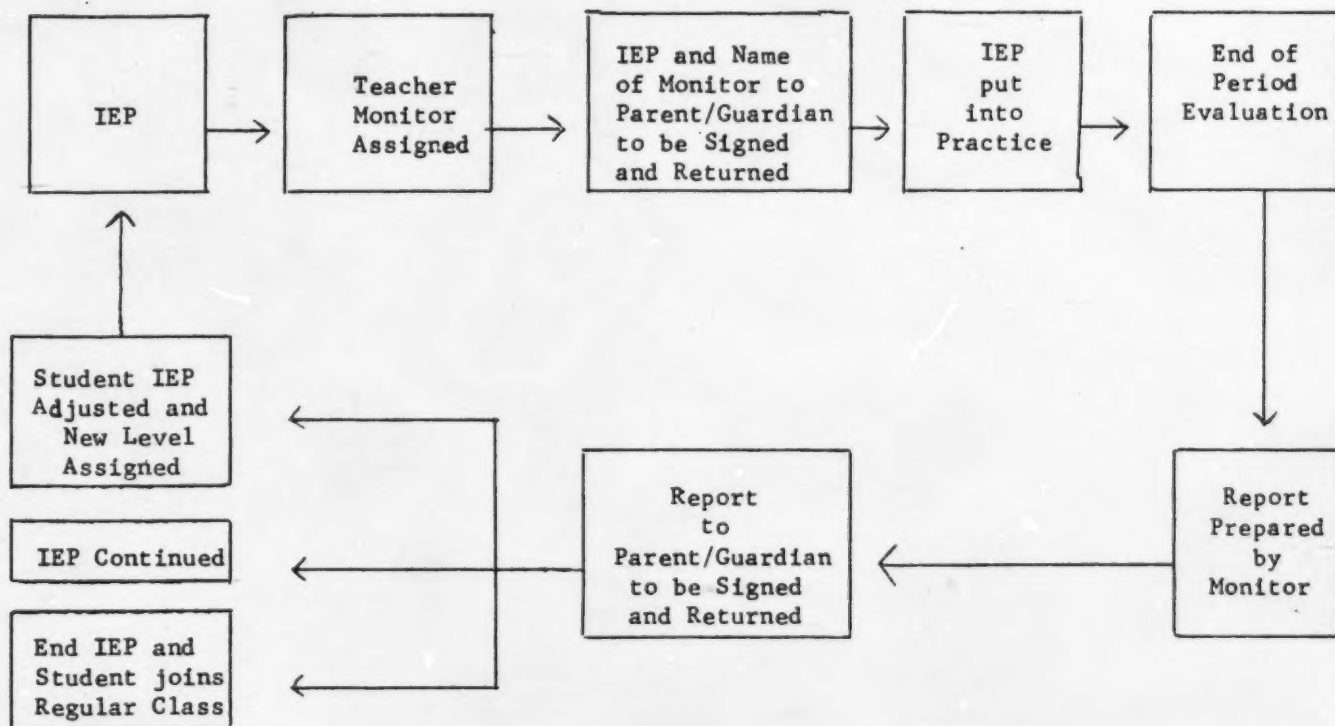


Figure 2

An Individualized Plan

- I. Diagnostic Test
 - A. Form ability groups
- II. Instruction (by ability group)
 - A. Group instruction
 - B. Skill building at learning stations
 - C. Work sheet practice
 - D. Projects
- III. Interim Test (by ability group)
 - A. Determine each student's deficiency for correction
- IV. Instruction (by ability group)
 - A. Group or individual remediation
 - B. Continue skill building (as shown in II above)
- V. Interim Retest (by ability group)
 - A. Determine each student's deficiency for correction
- VI. Continue IV and V until deficiencies corrected
- VII. Mastery Test
 - A. Successful completion: move to next module

Figure 3

The Small Group Approach to Mastery Learning

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